



AAC Publications

Thomas F. Hornbein, 1930 – 2023

I grew up in Ohio, where there are no mountains, but my parents made the mistake of subscribing to *National Geographic*. There were a number of things in that publication that piqued my ten-year-old mind, one of which was the mountains of the world. I clearly remember reading about the 1960–61 Silver Hut Expedition in Nepal, which studied the physiology of acclimatization, and the 1963 American expedition to Everest.

Tom Hornbein also grew up in the Midwest, in St. Louis. There were no mountains, just the family rooftop and trees in his yard. But Tom's parents made the mistake of sending him as a teenager to a summer camp in Estes Park, Colorado, where he became obsessed with mountains.

Little did our parents know how those boyhood exposures would shape our lives.

I am not going to recount Tom's personal, academic, or mountaineering life in detail. It has been eloquently described in a number of tributes and biographies. In some ways, Tom's life became a legend as he lived it.

Suffice it to say that Tom's mountaineering history grew from Estes Park, where, as a scrawny teenager and with great passion, he scaled challenging new routes on the surrounding crags and in Rocky Mountain National Park. Without losing a beat in his climbing, he switched his studies from geology at the University of Colorado in Boulder to medicine at Washington University in St. Louis, where he became immersed in the field of anesthesiology. In his spare time, he went to Masherbrum in 1960 (the expedition made the first ascent) and then, in 1963, finagled an early exit from the Navy to join the American Everest expedition, during which he and Willi Unsoeld sauntered up the West Ridge—a climb for the ages.

That climb defined Tom, who in the meantime was pursuing an academic medical career. He did not want to be known as the "doctor who climbed Everest," but he was. Over the years he eventually surrendered and carried the banner well, always downplaying the historic ascent but actually having pride in the event. He ascended to the chairmanship of the Department of Anesthesiology at the University of Washington and developed one of the premier departments in the country. I had read Tom's book about the Everest climb when I was in medical school in New York, and I became a passionate climber myself at the Shawangunks, but our paths didn't intersect until I started a residency and fellowship at the University of Washington, where I ended up spending most of my career.

When Tom and I met, he seemed to want to put me on belay. He mentored me in the neurophysiology of breathing, and we taught the respiratory physiology course side by side for 25 years. We eventually co-edited a 968-page book on altitude physiology: *High Altitude: An Exploration of Human Adaptation*. He would always bail me out when an astute medical student would ask a difficult question. In our free time, with a few friends and my kids, we spent as much time as possible in the mountains, scampering up climbs in the Cascades and joining two adventures in Yunnan Province in China in the late 1980s with Nick Clinch, Pete Schoening, and others, hoping to climb the highest peak in the Kang Karpo (Meili Xueshan) range.

In his legendary annual lecture to the second-year medical students, which I heard many times, Tom

would spend the first hour teaching high-altitude physiology, and in the second hour he'd recount the 1963 West Ridge climb. Many graduates seemed to remember only one lecture throughout their entire medical school career—Tom's.

Yet I never felt in those talks that he was talking about himself. The Everest climb transcended him and all the climbers on that trip and dealt with more ethereal topics: (1) risk in the mountains, medicine, and life; (2) uncertainty as a motivating force to achieve vision and commitment; (3) focus on the simplicity of the goals to achieve success; and (4) the fellowship that generates a force bigger than its parts. The concept of "on belay" was never spoken but was always understood and present.

There are too many instances where Tom kept me on belay in my academic, personal, and mountaineering lives to recount. He always listened, supported without reserve, but never directed. I and—I am sure—a multitude of friends, trainees, colleagues, and co-climbers felt the support of his rope that did not tether but allowed one to learn to lead in their own way.

Given who Tom was, should I have been in awe? Should I have wondered why he wanted to hang out with me? Maybe he took vicarious pleasure in my foibles and follies. Regardless of the answers, I never took our friendship for granted, and I felt lucky, but I also knew he would always be there, not asking anything in return, knowing that we always had each other on belay.

I was told that Tom had mellowed from his earlier days, but his insistence on excellence in writing that I did with him, in scientific goals, and in teaching never waned. Part of his mellowing may have come from the good fortune of marrying someone smarter than he was, Kathy Mikesell, a pediatrician, who was an elegant counterbalance to Tom's intensity. They raised a daughter, Melissa, now a successful environmental attorney with elements of both of them steering her life. They blended well with Tom's five older kids from his first wife, Gene Swartz.

The last few years, Tom was obsessed with his "not going to be here much longer." Although he was right, I just told him to be quiet because he was going to outlive me, and that he just needed to keep hiking up to wedding meadow (where his daughter Melissa got married), behind his house near Lumpy Ridge in Estes Park, in order to keep in shape. Although his mind stayed fit, he had a hard time accepting that his body wasn't keeping up.

As I write this, Tom has only been gone a short while, but I realize how much space in my mind he has occupied for more than 45 years, and that now I can't just call him to discuss, cajole, and laugh. When all is said and done, Tom was all of the things that his legend has engendered, but to me he was just Tom, my colleague, belay buddy, and friend.

—Robert "Brownie" Schoene

Editor's Note: An essay about Tom Hornbein's landmark book on the 1963 climb, Everest: The West Ridge, accompanied this essay in the 2024 AAJ. Find it [here](#).

Images



Tom Hornbein during the 1963 expedition to Everest.

Article Details

| | |
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| Author | Robert "Brownie" Schoene |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 65 |
| Issue | 98 |
| Page | 341 |
| Copyright Date | 2024 |
| Article Type | In memoriam |